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Review Essay

A Quiet Diversity in the Land: Mennonites in Ontario

Draper, Barb. 2010. *The Mennonites of St. Jacobs and Elmira: Understanding the Variety*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press. Pp. 378.

Martin, Donald. 2003. *Old Order Mennonites of Ontario: Gelassenheit, Discipleship, Brotherhood*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press / Herald Press. Pp. 381.

Steiner, Samuel. 2015. *In Search of Promised Lands. A Religious History of Mennonites in Ontario*. Kitchener, ON: Herald Press. Pp.877.

By Mark Loudon, *German, University of Wisconsin—Madison*

For over two centuries, the Anabaptist presence in Ontario has been a visible part of the province's religious, social, and cultural landscape. Readers interested in understanding the diversity of Mennonite and Amish groups in Ontario, past and present, are well served by the recent appearance of these three fascinating books that complement one another.

The most recent of these, Steiner's is also the most comprehensive in terms of scope and heft, containing nearly 600 pages of text and over 150 pages of notes. Its content is organized chronologically, tracing in detail the history of mainly Mennonite, but also Amish, groups in Ontario from their earliest arrival in the late eighteenth century all the way to the present. In his book, Donald Martin, himself an Old Order Mennonite affiliated with the Markham-Waterloo Conference (similar to the Weaverland Mennonite Conference in the United States), also proceeds chronologically, focusing on the spiritual history of the conservative groups to which he is closest. Finally, Barb Draper's book aims—and succeeds admirably—at introducing readers to the major Mennonite groups active today north of Kitchener and Waterloo, the region where Anabaptists in Ontario are currently most numerous, against a historical background. All three books are written in such a way as to be accessible to a broad spectrum of readers.

Samuel J. Steiner was for many years a librarian and archivist at Conrad Grebel University College, affiliated with the University of Waterloo. Among Steiner's numerous scholarly accomplishments was his service as founding managing editor of the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, the premier reference for information related to Anabaptist history and life. Steiner's *In Search of Promised Lands* will undoubtedly be considered *the* standard work on the development of Ontario Mennonite and Amish groups; no other monograph comes close in terms of breadth and depth in describing what is a profoundly complex and diverse tapestry of Anabaptist communities in Canada.

The bulk of *In Search of Promised Lands* consists of fifteen chapters, beginning with a review of the history of Mennonites of Swiss and southern German background in colonial

Pennsylvania, who provided the first settlers to what was then Upper Canada after the American Revolution. As is true for Anabaptist groups in the United States—Mennonite and Amish, as well as Brethren and Hutterite—the history of Ontario’s spiritual communities has been characterized by a profound degree of differentiation through divisions, some benign, others more emotionally fraught. The relatively tolerant religious climate of North America has offered Anabaptist groups of considerable outward diversity the opportunity to thrive. At the same time, the overall (though by no means total) lack of persecution of Anabaptists in Canada and the United States, certainly in comparison to what their spiritual ancestors and cousins experienced in Europe and Russia, has allowed especially Mennonite groups the freedom to live their shared Christian faith and form affiliations that can appear dizzyingly complex to outside observers.

Throughout his book, Steiner does an excellent job of clearly showing how this complexity has arisen as Mennonite and Amish groups in Ontario have been influenced by or defined themselves against their non-Anabaptist neighbors in spiritual, cultural, and material ways. Too often the diversity of Anabaptist groups around the globe is depicted by outsiders in mainly material terms, especially with regard to dress and the acceptance or rejection of technology, without attempting to understand the Christian faith that underlies the choices Anabaptists have made and continue to make in deciding how best to put their faith into action. Steiner never loses sight of the spiritual issues at stake in disagreements among Ontario Mennonite and Amish believers, individually and collectively, over practical questions such as whether or how to endorse Sunday schools, the use of automobiles, etc.

In general, both Steiner and Donald Martin, in his book focused on Ontario Old Order Mennonites, explain clearly how influences from outside the Anabaptist tradition, both spiritual and secular (including material), have shaped the identities of the various Mennonite and Amish groups that have emerged in Canada, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this respect, the Ontario history resembles the experiences of Anabaptists in the United States. For example, Steiner and Martin both address the influence of Pietism, a renewal movement that emerged in seventeenth-century Europe and, like Anabaptism, was also brought to Pennsylvania during the colonial era. While early Pietists and Anabaptists may be seen as sharing much in common with one another in their yearning for a deeper experience of their Christian faith independent of formal institutions, especially political structures, Martin in particular underscores some of the major differences between Pietistic groups, such as the various Brethren churches, on the one hand, and Mennonites and other Anabaptists, on the other.

Early in his book, Martin discusses how Pietist thought posed a challenge to the “spirit of *Gelassenheit*” that he sees as central to traditional Anabaptism and contemporary Old Order Mennonite churches. A crucial difference between the two expressions of Christian spirituality lies for Martin in the importance for Anabaptists of living one’s faith in a clearly defined community of like-minded brethren. Pietism, as Martin explains, emphasizes the individual believer’s relationship with God. “Pietists sought personal salvation and godliness, while the Anabaptists believed in a *visible* church of Christ” (34). A further difference has to do with the

Pietists' inclination to share their faith actively with others, as opposed to the preference of traditional Anabaptists to remain "the quiet in the land." Martin points out the strong Pietistic influence in the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s, especially in Wesleyan Methodism and the spirit of "holiness" associated with it. On holiness, Martin writes

Non-theologically-minded Mennonites found the 'holiness' movement difficult to decipher, but they certainly felt it. Wesleyan 'holiness' or Christian perfection did not blend with Mennonite humility. 'It was in the mutual yielding to Christ within a disciplined covenant that the Mennonites 'felt' their religion. It hardly occurred to discuss the emotional states that accompanied this yielding and mutuality, as subjects in themselves.' [quotation from MacMaster *Land Piety*] [...] 'Holiness' advocates taught that by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit it was possible to attain such a degree of holiness that one no longer had to struggle with one's carnal nature. However, this presented a very confident, even boastful, attitude that was contrary to traditional Mennonite thought (38).

In Martin's view, which is a widely held one among Old Orders today—Mennonite and Amish alike—more modern or assimilated Mennonite groups have been drawn away from traditional *Gelassenheit* under the influence of the more individualistic expressions of faith and life found in pietistically inclined Protestant churches.

For his part, Steiner also sees the impact of Wesleyan holiness on Ontario Mennonites, especially among the Mennonite Brethren in Christ (MBC), which emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, an era of momentous change across multiple Anabaptist groups in North America. The MBC, which existed as a distinct denomination under this name from 1883 to 1947, had its roots in an early division in the North American Mennonite church, in 1847, when the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference was formed out of the Franconia Conference. The leading figure in this split was John H. Oberholtzer (1809–1895), who, though not technically a Pietist, was nonetheless "interested in modernizing the church through better education in Sunday schools and through church publications, improved organization of the conference, and mission outreach" (Steiner, 112). Donald Martin captures the Old Order valuation of Oberholtzer's role in the 1847 split aptly:

He defied church order and refused to wear the regulation coat as required of all ministers. In May 1844 the conference silenced him. Although there were open issues, the root of the dissension was Oberholtzer's democratic procedures and his different definition of piety versus *Gelassenheit* and brotherhood. When the unity of the conference snapped, Oberholtzer and fifteen of his colleagues walked out of the conference on October 7, 1847. These progressive leaders then formed the General Conference Mennonites (82).

Later changes in Mennonite practice that divided progressives from conservatives in the

decades before the MBC was formally constituted included the holding of private prayer and public revival meetings, expressions of a more Wesleyan as opposed to traditional Mennonite form of piety. The increasing use of English rather than German in worship was also a marker of progressivism in the MBC and other churches.

The divide between progressive denominations and the Old Order continued to widen as members of groups like the MBC became active in missionary work and established formal, supra-congregational governance structures. In 1947, in a clear sign of their continued movement away from a distinctively Anabaptist identity, the MBC decided to drop “Mennonite” from their name, becoming the United Missionary Church. Eventually, after two more mergers, in 1969 (yielding the Missionary Church) and 1993 (resulting in the Missionary Church of Canada), the Anabaptist stream of which the MBC had been a part, flowed into what is today the Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada. The description of their history on the EMCC’s website is instructive, recognizing both their Anabaptist and Pietist roots, yet with a clear emphasis on the latter: “Our [Missionary Church of Canada] background brought deep Anabaptist values of community, mission, and discipleship so characteristic among Swiss Mennonite streams. When Wesleyan evangelism brought to life the Person of the Holy Spirit in the lives of our predecessors, a movement of Jesus-led counter-culture emerged” (emcc.ca/who-we-are/our-story).

Impressive is Samuel Steiner’s ability to situate crucial details of the development of Ontario Anabaptist groups such as the MBC and many others without losing sight of the larger doctrinal and cultural issues at play. Likewise, Donald Martin presents Old Order Mennonite history by making clear that the causes of divisions go much deeper than spats over questions such as what is the appropriate cut of a minister’s coat. Martin devotes one chapter to “Old Order Mennonite Life” (261–90) that will be of particular interest to non-Old Orders, Anabaptists, and others. Martin is sensitive to the fact that some readers may view aspects of Old Order culture negatively. He writes, for example, that “[a]lthough modern women may assume that Old Order Mennonite women are very limited by tradition, the opposite reflects Old Order women’s feelings” (271), then quotes an unnamed Old Order woman at length:

[...] To an outsider, Mennonite women appear restricted when they honour the sequence of headship, but in reality they are free. A Mennonite woman desires that her husband is the head of the home, yet together they are partners in the work of Christ. When the order of headship is regarded, there is harmony in the home, for each one is working in God’s order and there is no strife in seeking or coveting the other’s position. I’ve never felt restricted—it is just relaxing to live in the order of God. Obedience to God’s order is an expression of inner liberation [...] (271)

Another area of Old Order life that outsiders are particularly curious about—and which has been the subject of considerable attention and distortion in popular media, with regard to the Old Order Mennonites’ close spiritual cousins, the Amish—has to do with youth. Martin’s

section of the “Old Order Mennonite Life” chapter on young people makes clear what the community’s expectations are and how these expectations are grounded in Scripture. He also points out differences across Old Order subgroups. The most traditional group, for example, the so-called David Martin Mennonites, continues to allow bed courtship and the limited consumption of alcohol and tobacco.

The diversity of contemporary Ontario Mennonite groups is the focus of the third book under review here, Barb Draper’s *The Mennonites of St. Jacob’s and Elmira*. Draper, a modern Mennonite whose parents grew up in Old Order communities, approaches her subject matter with the same degree of sensitivity and respect as Steiner and Martin show in their books. And crucially, she does not reduce Mennonite diversity to superficial differences in, say, the acceptance of the bicycle or the style of women’s coverings. Though scholars will benefit from Draper’s book, her target audience is the curious non-academic reader. She concentrates her discussion on Swiss/southern German-descended groups with roots in colonial Pennsylvania, with the exception of a chapter on Old Colony Mennonites. After an introductory chapter titled “From Switzerland to Woolwich Township,” Draper devotes roughly one-third of her book (approximately 90 pages) to an overview of nineteenth-century Mennonite history that clearly lays out the growing divide between traditionalists and progressives, thereby helping readers understand the diversity across contemporary groups.

The bulk of Draper’s book consists of chapters on the six major Mennonite groups living in or near the communities of St. Jacobs and Elmira, which are located just north of Kitchener and Waterloo: Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, Old Order Mennonites, David Martin Mennonites and Orthodox Mennonites, Markham-Waterloo Conference Mennonites, Conservative Mennonite Churches, and Old Colony Mennonites. Each chapter has a strongly historical component, succinctly explaining how the modern expressions of faith and lifestyle found in each group have come about. In this way, these chapters build nicely on Draper’s earlier discussion of major trends in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Mennonite history.

Any book on Mennonites or related Anabaptist groups that is intended for a general audience should take care not to depict its subjects, especially more conservative groups, as fixated on material questions, such as whether or not to allow pneumatic tires on tractors or electricity in homes. Likewise, such books and other popular media, which are usually produced by non-conservative Mennonites or authors with no Anabaptist background, need to ensure that they do not represent groups who keep their distance from more progressive believers and the secular mainstream as being “stubbornly ignorant.” Draper is to be commended for the balanced and nonjudgmental tone throughout her book when she discusses groups such as the David Martins, Orthodox Mennonites, and Old Colony Mennonites. She does this by drawing on reliable sources, including texts written by conservative insiders themselves. In the first section of her chapter on “The Nineteenth Century: Changing Theology,” titled “Humility Theology,” Draper quotes two verses from the text of a German hymn that is one of the most familiar to conservative North American Mennonites and Amish today (in German, *Demut ist die schönste*

Tugend).

Humility is the greatest virtue
For all Christians' glory and honour.
For it adorns our young people
And the aged even more.
Take care not to praise
Those who have been highly successful.
Humility is more than gold or money
And what is highly esteemed in the world [...] (104)

The dichotomy of humility versus pride (*Demut* vs. *Hochmut* in German) is central to an understanding of traditional Anabaptist thought.

The one group discussed by Draper that is objectively beset with the greatest challenges, at least on the material level, is the Old Colony Mennonites. Most of those living in Ontario today are closely tied to conservative communities in northern Mexico that have experienced numerous difficulties in recent years, especially with regard to their youth. Draper does an admirable job of describing the ways in which Old Colony migrants have adapted to life in Canada, including their interactions with other Mennonites. Different from their coreligionists of Swiss and southern German descent, the Old Colony Mennonites are the heirs to a longer legacy of hardship, especially from their time in Russia, the negative effects of which can still be seen today. Popular media treatments of Old Colony Mennonites, especially those living in Latin America, often dwell on their problems, yet Draper, to her credit, paints a balanced picture for her thoughtful readers. Of special value is the final section of her chapter on the Old Colony Mennonites that compares them with their Old Order counterparts, a fascinating look at how these two conservative Anabaptist groups have developed.

Overall, readers with a range of backgrounds and interests will benefit from these three books on the Mennonite presence in Ontario. Each is written in an accessible style and effectively edited and collectively provide a wonderful complement the sizable and growing literature on North American Anabaptist history and life.